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AUTHOR Downey, Ronald G.
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ABSTRACT

Small rural social systems tend to have great impact on the social behavior and performance of rural youth in higher education. The issue is the degree to which rural youth from a social environment requiring active and continuous social involvement can exist in a larger social system which may require more passive and observational modes of social interaction. Evidence suggests that they can cope successfully. Generally, youth from smaller schools (versus larger schools) tend to think their work is more important, take broader roles, have greater skills in social communication, have a greater sense of group cohesiveness, and find their work more meaningful. However, rural youth have limited occupational role models; consequently, they have limited views of occupational opportunities and tend to select from familiar areas. The general socio-economic level of a student's family is a minor contributor to his chances of remaining in college. The higher the educational level of his parents, the more likely he is to persist in college. Within a single institution, few (if any) differences exist between students from rural versus metropolitan areas in terms of academic performance or persistence. However, rural youth may enter college slightly less prepared by their high school background. (CM)

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND RURAL YOUTH

Ronald G. Downey
Manhattan, Kansas

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors which could and do influence rural students' attitudes towards, attendance at, and performance in higher education. As a prelude to determining these factors, it is important to identify the potential sources of influence. Specifically, I will be looking at three major influence factors: general social environment, family background, and educational background. Another potential source of influence which I have not considered is genetic, since it does not seem to be reasonable that any genetic differences exist for rural youth (e.g., intelligence). While I will tend to talk of these factors as separate influences, it should be recognized that they all interact with each other and, in fact, form the environmental network within which rural youth grow up and mature.

In preparing this paper, I have attempted to identify salient features of the aforementioned factors and their potential impact on the performance of rural youth in higher education. I should also make it clear that I will be concerned with the modal response of rural students and not how any single individual may or may not perform before and during their higher education experience.

In examining the features which impact upon rural students, one outstanding feature can be identified; that is, the smallness of the social systems within which rural youth develop. Small social systems tend to have some rather dramatic impacts upon the social behavior and performance of

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rural youth. (The information below was taken from Barker and Gump, 1964; Barker, 1968; and Downey, 1978.) Specifically, students from smaller rural schools tend to engage in a variety of programs and tend to maintain their program activities in the face of adversity. Also, students from smaller schools tend to engage in a variety of leadership activities, choose difficult tasks and important tasks, and tend to persevere in their activities.

Contrary to the popular view, students from smaller schools tend to be less sensitive and evaluative of the differences that they find in other students. Perhaps an example is in order to explain this phenomenon. In a small school in which only a limited number of individuals are available to participate in sports activities, individuals with limited skills are valued by their very presence alone and are not required to be superstars.

Rural youth often find themselves in positions of greater responsibility and more functional utility and, therefore, often find themselves experiencing greater insecurity due to their being thrown into areas and activities in which they feel less than competent. This greater degree of social participation leads to a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment with doing rather than watching. Also, rural youth tend to be absent less often from social activities, tend to persist in jobs and positions, and to a greater degree, are punctual. This greater degree of participation and activity in social groups leads to different attitudes on the part of rural youth towards work and social roles. Generally, they tend to think their work is more important, tend to take broader roles, have greater skills in social communication, have a greater sense of group cohesiveness, and find their work more meaningful.

To quickly summarize, youth in smaller schools (versus bigger schools) tend to participate more often in social activities, have positive attitudes towards this participation, and tend to be more effective. What, then, is the impact of this background upon their behavior and performance in higher education?

Before discussing this impact, one must recognize that institutions of higher education in the United States are very heterogenous (e.g., they vary in size, social structure, mission, level, place, and so on). Clearly, the experiences of a rural youth in a local community college will differ dramatically from those of an individual in a large, urban, non-residential college. For those rural youth who decide to remain at home and attend a local community college, these social experiences will enable them to continue to perform adequately in their present social environment. For those individuals who decide to go to a large, urban, commuter university, these same social skills may well be disfunctional and lead to a variety of inappropriate and dissatisfying experiences. For those individuals who decide to attend land-grant and state university systems, these experiences may be somewhat different. Most land-grant and state universities exist in small metropolitan or town environments. They are primarily residential in character (i.e., the students reside in dorms and on campus), and they engage in a variety of academic and social experiences for the students. Therefore, of the three types of universities which I have enumerated, the land-grant and state university systems are more likely to require social interactive skills for their student bodies. Also, it should be noted that research (Downey, 1980) had indicated that students who become involved in academic and social activities tend to persist until graduation in these universities. The issue, therefore, becomes the degree to which rural youth,

who were raised in a social environment which required active and continuous social involvement, can exist in a larger social system which may require more passive and observational modes of social interaction.

The weight of the evidence would strongly suggest that rural youth can make this accommodating effort. They, in fact, can change from active participatory social interaction to a more inactive, observational mode. This change in role behavior is required by the larger numbers of potential participants in social activities at institutions of higher learning and therefore is required of most students in this context.

A social factor which I have not discussed to this point is the occupational role models that rural youth encounter (ACT, 1974). In rural and small-town environments, the numbers of individuals in varied occupational roles tend to be limited. There is an underrepresentation of individuals in high technology areas (e.g., communications), individuals in artistic endeavors (a concert pianist), and individuals in a variety of social service areas (e.g., a psychologist). With these statements, I do not intend to suggest that there are not appropriate role models for rural youth in terms of occupational goals; only that there is a degree of limitation engendered by the smaller social/occupational environment. Certainly the pervasiveness of mass communications would, to some degree, modify these limitations and expand the views that students have of potential occupations.

What, then, may be the effects of this limitation? To some degree, one would expect and find that rural youth, upon entering higher education, have more limited views of the occupational opportunities that exist and would select from the areas with which they are most familiar. As they proceed through college, rural youth would therefore be expected to engage in more

frequent changes in their majors and to have a greater sense of insecurity in their choices as their occupational views are expanded from their interactions with faculty and students. Since more than three-quarters of an entering student body changes their educational and occupational goals before graduation, changing is a natural event for the majority of college students.

To the degree that students perceive the incompatibility of their particular occupation and return to their rural environment, they will evaluate these occupations in a different light.

The second major category that I am going to discuss that may impact upon rural youth and their success in higher education is their family background. A quick review of biodemographic information (U.S. Census, 1972) on rural versus urban families indicates a variety of dimensions upon which they may differ. These dimensions include the mother's and father's occupation, education, and finances. A similar subset of family background factors has been found to be important in predicting persistence of students in college (Astin, 1976). Specifically, the general socio-economic level of a student's family is a contributor, albeit minor, to the student's chances of remaining in an institution of higher learning. The educational background of the student's mother and father are contributors to this persistence; specifically, the degree to which the mother or father has a college degree contributes positively to the student's persistence in college.

Research has determined that students who have lived on a farm, lived in a small town, or lived in a moderate sized city are more frequent drop-outs than individuals from larger, metropolitan areas. If we examine this research in depth, it may well be an artifact of certain student tendencies.

Most students tend to attend an institution of higher learning which is near their place of residence. To the degree that rural students attend smaller institutions and/or state institutions and do not attend metropolitan institutions, and vice versa, and to the degree these institutions may differ in their retention rates, then these statistics which were based on comparisons throughout the United States may be misleading. That is, if a student who attends a state university has a greater chance of not surviving in that state university than a metropolitan student who attends a metropolitan university, clearly the variable of interest is not the place of residence but the institution. Support for this thesis can be found in a variety of research projects conducted at Kansas State University (Downey, 1978, 1980). When the persistence rate for students from various sized high schools was compared, little if any effect was found. Further, there were few if any differences in the performance of students from rural versus metropolitan areas. This would tend to suggest that within a single institution, few if any differences exist between students from rural versus metropolitan areas in terms of their academic performance or persistence.

The third and final influence upon the performance of rural youth in higher education is their education preparation in high school. The data we will primarily be dealing with was provided by the ACT office and Don Davis here in Manhattan, Kansas (ACT, 1974). The information comes from the ACT test and the questionnaire items. It is clear when one looks at the ACT scores of students from rural versus larger high schools that there are ACT differences in all areas. Similar differences exist for both males and females, and for students from different high school curriculum areas.

Differences for all ACT areas are approximately one to two points on the average. These are statistically significant results, but the practical significance must be questioned. It should be apparent that the vast majority of rural and urban students make similar ACT scores. One would expect and find similarly small differences would exist at the university level.

The results for self-reported high school grades are not quite as clear. In the data from ACT, rural students tend to report slightly lower grades in all academic areas reported (i.e., math, English, social studies, and natural science). These differences cease to exist if you look further at students who have taken college preparatory courses. Further, in data that I collected at Kansas State University, students from rural schools tended to have a slightly higher self-reported GPA's than those from urban areas, suggesting that a self-selection process occurs for students from college bound programs and students who decide to attend institutions of higher education. The results of this self-selection are to weed out students with lower high school grades. These self-selection processes do not seem to effect achievement test scores.

There is evidence that rural youth generally have lower aspirations, are <u>not</u> sure of their goals in academic areas, and predict lower performance for themselves in college. It would appear, on the surface, that those students who have lower aspirations and are not sure of their goals tend not to apply for entrance to higher education.

In addition to the students' lower performance in high school, rural youth tend to have a slightly different level of satisfaction with their high school experiences. Specifically, rural youth are less satisfied

with the variety of courses offered, the rules and regulations of the high school, the school's library, their lab experiences, the programs for academically outstanding students, and programs that provide career counseling. On the other hand, rural youth versus urban youth are satisfied with the grading practices and testing procedures, and no differences existed for their satisfaction with the type of instruction. To sum it up, rural youth tend to feel that their high school programs were less adequate.

If one examines these perceptions, one can see that the students' dissatisfaction tends to center upon peripheral types of programming. Smaller high schools can ill afford the resources required to provide programs of general counseling, guidance, library facilities, and laboratory facilities. Also, they are less adequately equipped and staffed in programs for the academically outstanding. Therefore, one could suspect rural youths' perceptions of their high school environment are correct.

What, then, is the expected outcome of these aforementioned differences in high school achievement and perception? Studies or rural students' performance in higher education are scanty, to say the least. As I have mentioned, I have conducted studies looking at differences in college achievement and retention for rural versus urban students. Similarly, ACT differences existed for rural students attending Kansas State University. Specifically, rural youth were lower in all ACT areas. On the other hand, rural students attending Kansas State University tended to have higher self-reported high school grades. The selection factor which seems to operate is one where students from rural environments attending higher education tend to come from college preparatory programs, tend to have higher levels of expectations, and tend to be more secure in their academic

goals. Of those students who survive four academic semesters at Kansas State University, no differences in grade point between rural and urban students exist. Four semesters seems to be an appropriate point for checking their performance, since students who survive four semesters tend to remain in college until graduation. The number of students who survive four semesters tends to be similar across all levels of high school size. This study would suggest that, low ACT not withstanding, the rural students performed as well as urban students and remained in college at a similar rate.

From the information presented to this point, it appears that rural youth are not at a disadvantage in attending institutions of higher education of certain types or sizes. As I mentioned before, there is a tendency for rural youth to be somewhat different in their selection patterns from urban youth. It would appear that in choosing an institution of higher education, rural youth are maximizing their strong points. Specifically, rural youth may be realistic in projecting their successes in higher education. Success in institutions of higher learning is made up of a variety of factors including academic preparedness, aspiration level, social and academic involvement, and occupational goals. There is evidence that rural youth may enter institutions of higher learning slightly ill prepared in terms of their high school background; however, they more than compensate for these difficulties because they have higher levels of aspiration, are better prepared socially to deal with college activities, and are better able to identify and pursue clear goals.

I should caution you that all of the information that I have spoken to you about to this point deals with groups. Any single individual could

break these group norms. Particularly, some rural youth do not enter higher education with clear goals; others will make poor choices in terms of the institution of higher education they attend. Still others, high ACT scores not withstanding, will find themselves with academic problems. There is little in the evidence I have discussed to this point to suggest anything other than slight caution, in dealing with rural youth, in their chances for success in higher education.

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